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ABSTRACT

Encouraging librarians to incorporate critical thinking skills and active learning techniques in their course instruction requires more than talking about it in a department meeting or distributing articles on the topic. At Old Dominion University (Virginia), librarians have tried conducting workshops, had readily-accessible binders of articles and suggestions for librarians to consult, and held idea-sharing sessions. They have also tried including a related library instruction annual performance objective for each reference librarian involved in instruction. This paper describes this latest attempt to incorporate active learning in library instruction and includes an active learning planning sheet which serves as an outline for planning and gives brief examples of active learning, a sample time frame, and a reminder that it requires more time to plan for the incorporation of critical thinking and active learning. With a continued emphasis on critical thinking skills and active learning, it is expected that librarians will improve their teaching skills and that learners will experience even greater understanding of libraries and information resources. (Author/SWC)

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ED 410 962

Helping Librarians to Encourage Critical Thinking Through Active Learning Techniques in Library Instruction

Encouraging librarians to incorporate critical thinking skills and active learning techniques in their course instruction isn't just a matter of talking about those things in a department meeting or routing articles about such topics. In addition to these approaches, at Old Dominion University, we have tried conducting workshops, having readily-accessible binders of articles and suggestions for librarians to consult, and holding idea-sharing sessions.

Recently we tried another approach: including a related library instruction annual performance objective for each reference librarian involved in instruction. With some variation, the objective was worded this way:

1. Choose a course you frequently meet with for library instruction.
2. Look at the content afresh and list three to four prime learning objectives ("Students will be able to search/explain/demonstrate...") for the session.
3. Identify at least three ways you will incorporate critical thinking into the session.
4. Identify one "active learning" technique or exercise that you will use during the session.
5. After you implement this in a class, report on it to the Instruction Services Librarian, listing the objectives, critical thinking methods, and the active learning technique you used.
6. Be prepared to report on your teaching session during a Reference & Research Services Department meeting on library instruction techniques.

To assist the librarians, the Instruction Services Librarian created and distributed an active learning planning sheet [see appendix] which serves as an outline for planning but also gives brief examples of active learning, a sample timeframe, and a reminder that it does, indeed, require more time to plan for the incorporation of critical thinking and active learning, but that learning is likely to be greatly enhanced.

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Some of the librarians consulted with the Instruction Services Librarian as they began to plan these sessions. Early on, there was evidence that the librarians were thinking creatively themselves. One librarian who was going to teach in a room (outside the library) packed wall to wall with students, with no provision for any online demonstrations or hands-on experience with electronic resources, designed a session with three activities that promote critical thinking. He proved to the other librarians that critical thinking can happen in any setting, it just requires good planning.

At the end of the semester the librarians met to share both their successes and the approaches that didn't work as well as hoped. A variety of techniques had been used—some dramatic and effective, some simple but still effective. With a continued emphasis on critical thinking skills and active learning, we expect that librarians will improve their teaching skills and that learners will experience even greater understanding of libraries and information resources.

[Appendix on next page]

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Active Learning Planning Sheet for Librarians

Course

How many students in each section

How many sessions with librarian

Length of each session

Learning objectives & corresponding methods (prioritize)

Objective	Learning Method	Time needed
1		
2		
3		
4		

Active learning can mean something as simple as having students answer questions requiring critical thinking, having students do the keyboarding in demonstration searches, or having students suggest vocabulary, truncation, parentheses, etc. in formulating a good search statement while demonstrating a database.

On the other hand, once initial instruction is given, active learning can take place by having the class work in teams to examine resources on their own. In this way, they are learning by doing and learning from their peers, with the librarian there to serve as the expert consultant and as the leader who keeps the session focused and makes sure that points are clarified, reinforced, or expanded on as necessary.

Many of the points librarians have traditionally taken class time to explain (hours the library is open, how to make a cd-rom search appointment, etc.) can be put on a handout or posted elsewhere so that class time can focus on search strategies, information retrieval techniques, evaluation of resources, and the like, using active learning processes.

Teams organized by types of resources

Student teams may be given standard worksheets and assigned specific resources to examine. The worksheets can ask for title of resource, type of information it contains, how it works and ease of use, currency/frequency of updating, limitations, etc. Groups can be given a certain amount of time, perhaps 10 minutes, for this and can then report their findings to the whole class (5 minute limit per group, for example).

Also, teams could be organized to solve simple library tasks or to complete an exercise in finding pertinent material on a topic.

Sample timeframe for a class 75-minute upper-division class session

10:00	Welcome & handouts, give overview of the session and basic objectives
10:05	Introductory session, putting things in context, looking at the big picture
10:10	Initiate group formation with clear instructions on assignments
10:13	Groups begin (for example, 1 group using *Yahoo* to search the Internet, one group searching a cd-rom database, 2 groups searching different printed indexes and/or other important reference works) with librarian remaining in the area for consultation
10:35	Groups return and begin presentations (5 groups x 4 minutes each, plus 1 minute per presentation for the librarian to make further clarifications)
11:00	Librarian pulls it all together, possibly with a reminder of search strategy (on a handout), a brief trip to the reference area to show pertinent locations, or reminder of services such as interlibrary loan, reference assistance, availability of printed guides, etc.
11:15	Class dismissed

When working on this year's performance objective for library instruction, you will realize that it does indeed take more effort to plan for incorporation of teaching critical thinking skills and for active learning, but that learning is greatly enhanced when students have to think through processes for themselves, discover what works well and not so well, or distill the essence of a certain resource and present it clearly to their peers. The schedule shown above is by no means a format to use in every library instruction session, it is intended only as a sample of the type of process one might use with a particular class.

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